



Kenneth L. Thompson '76

Straight to the Point

FOR the first three years after graduation from UM Carey Law, Kenneth L. Thompson '76 got his “taste for litigation” working for the late Baltimore City Circuit Court Judge Elsbeth Levy Bothe '52 when she was in the Maryland public defender’s office.

Next, Thompson joined forces with George Russell Jr. '54, one of Baltimore’s first African-American attorneys, in a private general practice that was still mostly criminal. Together they built Baltimore’s preeminent African-American law firm.

But in the mid-1980s, the major firms in Baltimore “needed to gray-up”—Thompson’s words for integrate—and the firm of Russell & Thompson merged with Piper & Marbury. As a result, Thompson’s practice moved away from the criminal to product liability and commercial.

Today, Thompson is a partner at Venable LLP (which he joined in May 2011) and has a practice focusing on civil and commercial litigation. He has built a national reputation for his successful representation of both plaintiffs and defendants.

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Locally, in 2010 Thompson served as one of four co-chairs on Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake’s mayoral transition team, assisting with economic development.

There’s a common thread that has run throughout Thompson’s legal career—the legacy of his legal education. He credits his professors at UM Carey Law for preparing him well.

“The Socratic method is a smart way to teach young students to become lawyers,” Thompson says. “It’s far more important to learn how to think than to learn ... a whole lot of facts. You also learn how to write in a different way”—much different than the way he wrote as an undergraduate English major at Maryland.

“If you learn the proper way to write, you can reduce complex issues into simple phrases,” he says. “It took me a while in law school to rework my thought processes and write in a way that got to the point and in a way that’s understandable. Legal writing is to make a point—period—and then advocate your opinion. The thought process is extremely important. That’s how you succeed in this profession.”

The skills he mastered as a criminal lawyer earlier in his career carried over to his civil litigation practice.

“Starting in criminal law makes you sharper,” Thompson says. “You have to stand on your feet without as much preparation. The substance is different, but the skills are the same. And it’s easier doing civil because you get discovery, which makes it a lot easier to prepare for trial.”

Thompson became a lawyer at a time when integration was in full swing.

“Today, the practice of law is more diverse than when I started,” Thompson notes. “But it was more collegial between lawyers then. A handshake was enough to close a deal. It’s more competitive now. There’s also a different ethic. People play closer to the line.”

Yet in other ways, the practice of law is more rewarding.

“It’s a lot more interesting,” Thompson said. “Take intellectual property and information technology—it’s moving every day, there’s a new form of action.”

And because the field is more diverse, “young people don’t care what color you are,” he says. “I don’t face discrimination like in my earlier days. And I never had the negative experiences of the generation before me. Whatever the obstacles were, I got over them, around them, or through them!” ■